

# SeaWorld publishes decades of orca data to help wild whales

By GENE JOHNSON  
Associated Press

SEATTLE — The endangered killer whales of the Pacific Northwest live very different lives from orcas in captivity.

They swim up to 100 miles a day in pursuit of salmon, instead of being fed a steady diet of baitfish and multivitamins. Their playful splashing awes and entertains kayakers and passengers on Washington state ferries instead of paying theme park customers.

But the captive whales are nevertheless providing a boon to researchers urgently trying to save wild whales in the Northwest.

SeaWorld, which displays orcas at its parks in California, Texas and Flor-

ida, has recently published data from thousands of routine blood tests of its killer whales over two decades, revealing the most comprehensive picture yet of what a healthy whale looks like. The information could guide how and whether scientists intervene to help sick or stranded whales in the wild.

“For us, collecting blood from free-ranging killer whales is exceedingly difficult, so it’s something we would rarely ever do,” said Deborah Fauquier, a veterinary medical officer at the National Marine Fisheries Service. “Having partners that are in the managed-care community that can provide us with blood values from those animals is very useful. It’s giving us a very robust baseline data set that we

haven’t had previously for these whales.”

The roundup of killer whales for theme-park display in the 1960s and ‘70s was devastating for the Pacific Northwest’s resident orcas: At least 13 were killed and 45 kept to awe and entertain paying crowds around the world, according to the Center for Whale Research on Washington’s San Juan Island. Only one of those orcas survives: Lolita, at the Miami Seaquarium.

Washington state eventually sued SeaWorld to stop the hunts. Today, 17 of SeaWorld’s 20 whales were born in captivity, including some descended from orcas captured near Iceland; the company hasn’t collected a wild orca in more than 40 years.

Under public pressure, it ended its captive breeding program and is replacing trained orca shows with what it describes as “more educational experiences where guests can still enjoy and marvel at the majesty and power of the whales.”

It took decades for the so-called southern resident killer whales, which spend several months every summer and fall in the marine waters between Washington state and Canada, to recover from the hunts. By the mid-1990s, their population reached 98.

Half a century later, the orcas are struggling against different threats: pollution, vessel noise and, most seriously, starvation from a dearth of Chinook salmon, their preferred prey. There

are just 75 left, and researchers say they’re on the verge of extinction.

Gov. Jay Inslee has proposed \$1.1 billion in spending to help the whales, with much of the money going toward protecting and restoring salmon habitat. The National Marine Fisheries Service, also known as NOAA Fisheries, is planning to propose expanded habitat protections this year for the whales’ foraging areas off the Washington, Oregon and California coasts.

SeaWorld has also boosted its efforts to help the southern resident orcas, pledging \$10 million to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Killer Whale Research and Conservation Program.

“Our stance is to do

research with our animals to try to help this population now, and that’s what we’re doing,” said Todd Robeck, SeaWorld’s vice president of conservation research. “That’s why I got into what I do — to try to help animals in the wild.”

Robeck is one of the lead authors on the review of SeaWorld’s data, which included results of more than 2,800 blood tests on 32 whales from 1993 to 2013. Data from sick and pregnant whales were excluded to obtain a standard range for blood values, including cholesterol, platelet count, triglycerides and many other metrics. The whales were trained to present the underside of their tails for the blood draws, which were taken once or twice a month.

# Housing: HB 2001 is part of a set of bills Kotek is championing

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Zika said.

Rep. Ron Noble, R-Carlton, who was part of a work group Kotek convened to hone the proposal, described his committee vote as a “courtesy yes.” He thinks the bill is better than it was, but he’s still not sold on idea of the state requiring local governments to loosen their land use rules.

“It’s a hammer, as opposed to a carrot,” Noble said.

The League of Oregon Cities still isn’t on board either, lobbyist Erin Doyle said, but it does think HB 2001 has improved by giving cities more control and more time to implement changes.

## Set of bills

HB 2001 is part of a set of bills Kotek is championing. House Bill 2002 is a more technical bill that aims to preserve subsidized low-income housing. House Bill 2003 would compel cities to permit affordable housing on residential land that they own. It would also require them to create more detailed reports on their housing needs and strategies to address them.

Taken together, those three bills would spend more than \$4.5 million out of the state’s general fund — largely for technical assistance to help local governments with planning — and authorize up to \$25 million in lottery bonds for an affordable housing preservation fund.

Kotek’s trilogy of bills have grabbed most of the attention around housing. But there are other proposals under consideration.

House Bill 2228, proposed by Rep. David Gomberg, D-Otis, would allocate \$2.5 million for housing-related technical assistance from the state to cities and counties. It’s intended to help small and rural communities, which often have just one planner on their payroll or under contract.

Another set of bills put forward by Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, would focus on manufactured homes, which she describes as “naturally occurring affordable housing.”

“Typically, it’s less expensive and more accessible to people of lower incomes,” Marsh said.

Marsh’s legislation would let people living in an old mobile home take out a state loan to buy a new one, provide state grants for old mobile homes to be hauled away and disposed, and set up another loan program intended to keep mobile home parks open and affordable for residents.

She has also put forward House Bill 2802, which would make up to \$13 million available in grants to help low-income residents with major home repairs. Gomberg, Keny-Guyer and Noble are co-sponsors.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

**In Clatsop County, a housing study concluded many newer homes are not affordable for families with an average income.**

“There’s only so much we can do that we drive ourselves as public agencies — only so much housing that we can build,” Marsh said. “We really need to look at ways that we can be effective in the private realm, in helping people to stay in their homes, upgrade their homes and not lose them.”

## Money an issue

Programs cost money, though. Budget-writers in the Legislature are already combing through spreadsheets trying to find savings, as key Democrats in Salem concede that the state will have to make difficult decisions to cut existing services, let alone add new ones.

“I think it’s real easy from an advocate standpoint to really passionately hone in on one program or feature,” said Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, who co-chairs

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State Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, D-Portland

the Ways and Means Committee. “But then also — looking at what’s the holistic sense — if you were to fund that, what does that take away elsewhere in the budget?”

Keny-Guyer said she it’s frustrating to help craft policies that she believes will help Oregonians, only to watch as the Ways and Means Committee set them aside for lack of money. It’s happened to her before, and she hopes this year will be different.

“The big message that I keep hearing this session is if you want funding, you have to come up with (revenue),” Keny-Guyer said.

Her solution: Pare back what she calls Oregon’s largest housing subsidy, a tax break for homeowners known as the mortgage

interest deduction.

Keny-Guyer wants to kill the mortgage interest deduction for second homes, as well as limit it for the state’s top earners. Households with at least \$200,000 in annual adjusted gross income would only be able to claim a portion of the deduction; those making an adjusted quarter-million or more wouldn’t be able to claim it at all.

Estimates suggest Keny-Guyer’s proposal, House Bill 3349, would raise about \$160 million during the next biennium. Keny-Guyer wants that revenue to be spent on affordable housing and homelessness.

“It’s hard for me to imagine worse places for this money to go than the wealthiest Oregonians,” Keny-Guyer said. “I’m going to fight like the dickens to have it go to housing and the most vulnerable populations.”

Republicans, even those on Keny-Guyer’s committee and sympathetic to her cause, are skeptical.

Zika pointed out that if HB 3349 passes, the Legislature could later decide to redirect those mortgage interest deduction savings — or it could slash the deduction further, so it wouldn’t just affect the 4% of Oregon taxpayers with more than \$200,000 in adjusted gross income. Noble said if the state does slap limits on who can claim the mortgage interest deduction, he wants them to be indexed to inflation.

Conservatives have zeroed in on legislation like HB 3349 as an example of Democrats, who hold House and Senate supermajorities this year, trying to tax their way out of a sticky situation with the state budget. Battle lines are already being drawn over a \$2 billion tax plan to fund K-12 and early childhood education; other proposals, like a payroll tax to pay for family and medical leave insurance and a sweeping plan to curb greenhouse gas emissions, have also earned the scorn of many business owners, especially outside the Portland area.

Kotek said this week that in the context of those political fights, she doesn’t think the Legislature will need to limit the mortgage interest deduction. Raising taxes would require Demo-

crats to flex their supermajorities, since 18 senators and 36 representatives must approve for a tax increase to pass. She’s hoping to find money for affordable housing elsewhere in the budget.

If the Legislature were to cap the deduction, though, Kotek thinks Keny-Guyer has the right intent.

“I think we would have to dedicate it to things that are helping us with our housing crisis,” Kotek said. “Otherwise, I think it would be a hard thing to defend, because I think people understand the nexus between that particular tax break and finding some money to pay for housing.”

Legislators already have passed rent control legislation that Gov. Kate Brown signed into law — it did not require supermajority approval — and last week, the governor signed off on another housing-related bill. House Bill 3336 allows Redmond to expand its urban growth boundary to

build up to 485 homes. Half of those homes would be for low-income residents.

“It’s part of a pilot project that we did,” Zika said. “Not only will it help Redmond, I think once this has been implemented and we see that cities can grow affordable housing units, then maybe we can spread it out to all the rest of the cities.”

## Experimental efforts

Legislators could approve other experimental efforts to provide more housing in other areas.

Noble’s House Bill 2997 is tailored for McMinnville, allowing the city to test a broader form of inclusionary zoning than Oregon allows in other cities. If it becomes law, McMinnville

could pass an ordinance requiring that within a new development of at least 20 apartments or houses, at least one-fifth would have to be built and maintained as affordable housing. The bill passed the House last week 51-8.

Tom Schauer, McMinnville city planner, described the proposal as a pilot project for his city. Noble said he doesn’t know if it will accomplish much, but he thinks it’s worth a shot.

“We need to look at stimulating supply to deal with our long-term housing issues, but we need to come up with something to deal with the short term,” Noble said. “We still have people on the street. We still have people that spend way too much money on housing.”

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